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ABSTRACT

Aggression and cooperation, which represent two critical features in the child's social domain, have one element in common: they both emerge from children's strong developmental push to initiate and maintain relationships with other children. Aggression is defined as any intentional behavior that results in physical or mental injury to any person or animal, or in damage to property. Aggressive actions can be accidental, instrumental, or hostile. Aggression should not be confused with assertion, which is behavior through which children maintain and defend their rights. Cooperation is defined as any activity that involves the willing interdependence of two or more children. Cooperation should be distinguished from compliance, which represents obedience to authority rather than intentional cooperation. Techniques adults can use for reducing children's aggression include helping children to verbalize their feelings, develop problem-solving approaches to conflicts, and notice the consequences of their aggressive actions. To foster children's cooperation, adults can acknowledge children's efforts to initiate appropriate social interactions, affirm helping behaviors, communicate positive regard, and support children's struggles to resolve interpersonal conflicts. In various ways, early childhood educators can support the emergence of children's positive interpersonal strategies, and early childhood programs can help parents understand the range of children's emerging social repertoires. (BC)

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Aggression and Cooperation: Helping Young Children Develop Constructive Strategies

Jan Jewett

In the past two decades, our understanding of the early roots of children's social behaviors and the importance of those emerging behaviors in the development of overall competence has expanded dramatically. What understandings from this knowledge base can help us support young children as they develop strategies for dealing with complex interpersonal relationships among their peers?

Aggression and cooperation represent two critical features in the child's social domain. What do they have in common? Both emerge from the child's strong developmental push to initiate and maintain relationships with other children, beginning at a very early age. Peer relationships provide critical opportunities for children to learn to manage conflict and work towards establishing intimacy. Aggression and cooperation are two possible strategies for dealing with the normal conflicts of early peer interactions. Both have important roots in early family interactions, both are responsive to adult expectations and values, and both can be responsive to environmental factors.

Aggression and Cooperation: Definitions and Emerging Features

Aggression is defined here as any intentional behavior that results in physical or mental injury to any person or animal, or in damage to or destruction of property. Aggressive actions can be accidental actions, in which there is no intentionality; instrumental actions, in which the child deliberately employs aggression in pursuit of a goal; or hostile actions, in which the child acts to cause harm to another person. Because peer interactions in their earliest forms emerge from play in which infants treat each other as they would treat a toy or interesting object—for example, one baby reaches over and grabs the cheek of another—unintentional aggression is a common and natural form of behavior for infants and toddlers. These accidental behaviors can enable young children to achieve desired results (for example, grabbing a toy from another child) and, in a short period of time, can easily develop into instrumental forms of aggression.

Aggressive behavior is a deterrent to friendships and social success. Studies indicate that young children cite aggressive behavior as a significant reason for disliking others. Research also indicates that aggressive behavior is responsive to environmental influences and can be encouraged or discouraged by experiences in home and school.

Aggression should not be confused with *assertion*—behavior through which a child maintains and defends his or her own rights and concerns. Assertive behavior reflects the child's developing competence and autonomous functioning and represents an important form of developmental progress. Assertiveness also affords the young child a healthy form of self-defense against becoming the victim of the aggressions of others.

Much evidence suggests that children who exhibit instrumental and hostile forms of aggression during the preschool years have been exposed, in early family interactions, to adults who encourage, model, or condone aggression by using discipline techniques that are punitive, rigid, and authoritarian; ignoring or permitting aggressive actions by the child and other children; providing or tolerating aggressive toys or aggressive images from television, movies, and books in the child's surroundings; or modeling aggression in their own interpersonal interactions.

Cooperation is defined here as any activity that involves the willing interdependence of two or more children. It should be distinguished from compliance, which may represent obedience to rules or authority, rather than intentional cooperation. When children willingly collaborate in using materials, for example, their interactions are usually quite different than when they are told to "share." Cooperation, like aggression, has its roots in very early, even preverbal, social interactions. Studies on the origins of prosocial behaviors, which include cooperation, suggest that family variables related to the development of prosocial behaviors include parental discipline techniques that are authoritative rather than authoritarian and that offer the child free expression of affection and nurturance. These techniques involve the use of high expectations; competent communication; and inductive reasoning, in which parents engage children in explanations of the reasons for family rules and limits. Children who demonstrate a number of cooperative strategies and can attend to the needs of others while also asserting and defending their own rights are more likely to be socially successful and to

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establish reciprocal, mutually satisfying friendships than are other children.

Techniques for Reducing Aggression and Fostering Cooperation

Because aggressive behavior can emerge as a normal behavior during the second and third years of life, it is important not to assume that such behaviors represent a personality trait. When adults assume that children are being intentionally aggressive, the expectation for undesirable qualities can become established and can lead to a "recursive cycle" (Katz and McClellan, 1991) in which children come to fulfill the expectations set for them.

Aggressive toddlers or preschoolers can benefit from support and encouragement for replacing aggressive behaviors with more socially productive alternatives. Important techniques include helping young children label and verbalize their feelings and those of others, develop problem-solving approaches to conflicts, seek and obtain assistance when in difficulty, and notice the consequences of their aggressive actions for their victims. Age-appropriate anger management techniques, and discussion of the causes and consequences of interpersonal conflicts, can help both young children and their caregivers deal with emerging aggressive behaviors. Adult guidance that is consistent, supportive, nonpunitive, and includes the child in understanding the reactions of all participants and the reasons for limits, will help even very young children cope with aggressive behaviors.

How can parents and teachers recognize and foster the cooperative behaviors which all children demonstrate as they develop? They can acknowledge children's efforts to initiate social interactions in appropriate ways, affirm helping behaviors, use positive discipline techniques and communicate their power, communicate positive regard and high expectations for all young children, and support each child's struggle to resolve interpersonal conflicts. Of critical importance are classroom strategies that promote cooperative, rather than competitive, endeavors; foster dramatic play techniques and reflective strategies for thinking about and discussing social interactions; and enable children to get to know and trust each other and work towards truly interdependent activity.

Program Policies That Foster the Development of Cooperation

Many children begin to show interest in peers as early as eighteen months. Early childhood educators can support the emergence of trusting and positive interpersonal strategies by encouraging the formation of play groups and regular social interactions that are supervised in a supportive manner. Children benefit from consistent and sustained relationships in which they can build trust, understand and predict the responses of their peers, and gain confidence in their ability to cope with conflictual interactions. Continuity of relationships can be nurtured. The grouping of friends and acquaintances across the years of program service enables children to develop and build on successful relationships.

Early childhood programs can help parents understand and deal with the full range of young children's emerging social repertoires. Parents often need help in addressing the common aggressive behaviors of young children in a nonjudgmental and constructive manner. Educators can encourage parents to provide regular opportunities for children to develop productive and sustained friendships by providing continuity of access to potential friends, inviting friends or potential friends to play at home, and helping children to continue to see good friends even if they lose daily and convenient contact.

Conclusion

Our emerging knowledge about the complex factors that enter into the development of social competence in the young child can be put to valuable use. Young children can benefit from the understanding support and guidance of the adults who help them develop constructive strategies for dealing with the challenges of early peer relationships.

For More Information

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